

Stevens' gifts

Disclosure isn't the real problem

(08/02/08 23:36:00)

Sen. Ted Stevens was indicted on felony charges that he failed to list more than \$250,000 worth of gifts on his Senate financial disclosure forms.

But what about the legality of accepting such huge gifts in the first place? Especially when they come from someone who is asking a senator to take official actions on his company's behalf?

If Sen. Stevens had simply taken the gifts and disclosed that fact, it appears he would not have committed a felony. He would have only violated Senate rules.

It's not a crime for a U.S. senator to accept sizeable gifts from influence-seekers while in office. But it should be. It's wrong.

When a member of Congress accepts large gifts from anyone seeking the member's official help -- even from a personal friend -- the presents arrive with an odor of corruption.

In this case, if the allegations are true, Allen and other Veco employees asked Stevens to use his official position to help Veco get funding for projects in Pakistan and Russia and to get federal grants, including at least one from the National Science Foundation. Allen and Veco also asked Stevens for assistance with Veco's interests in building an Alaska natural gas pipeline, according to the indictment. Federal authorities allege that Stevens did deliver at least some of the requested help.

A Justice Department official carefully explained during a press conference that bribery is not among the charges. For that, prosecutors would have to prove a connection between what Stevens did for Veco and what Veco did for Stevens.

Federal law should not set such a low standard for the conduct of our senators and representatives.

Congress should make it a crime for its members to accept gifts worth more than a couple hundred dollars from any influence-seeker, much less a couple hundred thousand.

BOTTOM LINE: It should be a crime for members of Congress to accept big gifts from influence-seekers -- but it's not.

Ethics cred

US Senate process has little

Accepting gifts of more than \$250 from friends -- as Sen. Ted Stevens is alleged to have done -- violates Senate rules unless the recipient has special permission.

But the system for enforcing that rule is pitifully weak. Investigations are handled through a clubby, secretive system: the Senate Select Committee on Ethics.

Anybody can file a complaint with the committee, says Sarah Dufendach, vice president of the congressional watchdog group Common Cause. But they can ignore it, she says.

"You'll probably get a response that says 'We are in receipt of the envelope,' " Dufendach jokes. And that may well be the last you ever hear of the case.

The committee doesn't have to make public the results of any investigation.

At the moment, it won't even confirm whether it has been investigating or will investigate Stevens' actions. The committee put out a statement Tuesday saying it can't comment.

Can't talk about it, if it's even happening, which we can't say. It could be over. Still can't say. Sorry.

What kind of confidence can we have in a system where the senators decide whether to investigate among themselves and may keep the results private too?

"No other profession does that," says Dufendach.

The U.S. House, at least, is testing out a way that gives more credibility to how Congress polices itself.

Just this March, the House voted to create an independent ethics office with six members who are not House members.

The independent group can initiate complaints against House members, and do a first round of investigating.

If it finds a complaint has substance, the House Ethics Committee investigates further.

Unless both the independent group and the House Ethics Committee agree to dismiss the complaint, the outcome is public.

Is this enough? It's too soon to tell. But it's for sure better than the insiders-only Senate system.

BOTTOM LINE: The Senate needs an independent group as a check on ethics violations.

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